

## **Comments on Professor Xiaohua Ma's "Entangled Trans-Pacific Memory--The Rise of Asian American Identity and US-Japan-China Relations"**

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Professor Ma's "Entangled Trans-Pacific Memory" is a thought-provoking paper, which struck many resonant chords as I read the paper. I would like to give my comments on Professor Ma's paper, not only on the issues she raises but also on some related issues which arose from the plenary presentations as well.

War is always complex and can be--as it has been--studied from various perspectives. Some of these studies--academic or journalistic--have contributed greatly to the memory of a particular war, but this memory may gloss over other disturbing issues. The view by many Americans that World War II was "the Good War" and that that generation of Americans was "the Greatest Generation" is popular now because many years have passed since the war, and the number of surviving veterans dwindles day by day. The need to honor these surviving men and women has prompted many Americans to take a strong interest in the war. World War II did seem a clear cut victory of freedom over tyranny, something to be proud of, including Japanese-Americans who fought in the war. Things are generally not as simple as they seem to be, however, and Professor Ma points out a number of issues which are not usually given attention in the present tide of interest.

### **I Breaking the walls of discrimination for Asian Americans**

Professor Ma shows how World War II and issues arising from its memory contributed to the breaking down of discriminatory acts and legislation against the Asian Americans. This is particularly true of the Chinese- and Japanese-Americans, as she rightly points out.

The experience of the Chinese- and Japanese-Americans was also experienced by Filipino-Americans, who before the war similarly faced immigration barriers and discrimination. Immigration was limited; some Filipinos were only allowed to go to Hawaii and no further. In southern California hotels showed signs saying "No Filipinos Allowed" and some parks in Los Angeles said "No dogs and Filipinos allowed." (This was not experienced by the Chinese alone). Filipinos who dated white American women risked being lynched by white men. Many other acts of discrimination were recorded. This was especially ironic since the

Philippines was then an American colony and Filipinos were supposedly being taught democracy by Americans.

The war in a limited sense broke some of this discrimination. White Americans became more respectful of Filipinos in the US after following the news of the Fil-American defense in Bataan and Corregidor. Filipinos were officially allowed to enter the US Army, not as cooks or barracks boys but as real soldiers. After the war, Filipinos were treated more equally, especially since many American soldiers had fought side by side with Filipinos. Immigration was relaxed for war brides and professionals.

But discrimination also continued. In the US Navy, Filipinos could not get into the commissioned ranks; many were relegated to serving as cooks and stewards. The two Filipino infantry regiments which were mobilized from Filipino-Americans were not sent to front line combat; they were given the dismal mopping up operations without press coverage. Making matters worse, the soldiers were denied several medals they deserved.

A second point is that the US' lifting of immigration restrictions and unequal treaty provisions was part of a policy of raising China to power status. The Chinese-Americans benefited from it as did China--that is, the Republic of China headed by Chiang Kai Shek. China was made a member of the United Nations' Security Council. This would bring problems during the Cold War, which I will point out later.

While much is known of the Japanese-American participation in the war (and the sufferings of those who were incarcerated in the internment camps), we know much less about the Chinese-American experience or the Filipino-American experience. The Filipino-Americans have produced a stirring documentary but have yet to come out with a good history.

## **II Changing memories through time**

The Chinese-American memories of the war and their memorializing it are something that merit attention. Most Americans think of World War II in terms of the war in Europe, which has received more attention in US media and film. This reflects the US wartime policy of Europe first, with the Pacific and Asia relegated to a secondary role. We can easily remember the famous war movies produced by Hollywood--"The Longest Day", "A Bridge Too Far", "Schindler's List", "Saving Private Ryan" and "Band of Brothers". All are set in Europe. The Pacific has received fewer blockbusters ("Tora! Tora! Tora!", "Bridge over the River Kwai", among others), and massive productions are few. "Flags of Our Fathers" came out only a few years ago, and "The Pacific" only this year. Movies on the Rape of Nanking and other Asian experiences are virtually non-existent ("Empire of the Sun" still focused on a white in China), so recent productions of these atrocities are especially welcome--but do the mainstream Americans watch them?

One reason why issues of Japanese atrocities have not been too highlighted is because the Cold War intervened, and rather than focus on Japan's war guilt, the US instead built Japan up as an ally. The US recognized the Republic of China in Taiwan rather than the People's Republic of China on the mainland. The US thus supported the ROC in the UN, until it changed policy in the 1970s. The war in China, never fully reported in the US press, was further driven from the American war memory as a result, except perhaps for reruns of John Wayne in "The Flying Tigers". Interestingly, the Republic of China gives prominence to the role of the Flying Tigers in its military history museums.

The Cold War enabled Japan to avoid coming head on with its war guilt, aided by the US since the need of the time was to stop the spread of Communism. War crimes trials and reparations claims were thus played down, and Japan entered the "free world." The Philippine reparation claims were discouraged by the US in order to build a stronger Japan. As a result, many Japanese do not know of the atrocities caused by Japanese soldiers during the war; the conservatives were also returned to power to ensure a Japan loyal to the US. Thus, distortions in Japanese textbooks and denials by Japanese politicians are repeated.

The Vietnam War however made many Americans abhor war; the people of that generation did not want reminders of war and thus there was no talk at that time of The Good War. Studs Terkel's book would come out when the Americans were searching for something positive after the setbacks they had suffered. President Reagan, Star Wars, the end of the Cold War, and victory in the Gulf war brought back self confidence and contributed to the renewed interest in World War II.

Until the 1970s, any Japanese who encountered Filipinos in Japan profoundly apologized for what had happened in the Philippines during the war. This was before they became an economic giant. After they gained economic power status, the apologies became fewer.

The rise of China shifted the economic balance in Asia and Japan was no longer number one, thus providing fertile ground for bringing World War II in Asia to the American consciousness. Japan's repeated denials of Nanking and politicians' visits to Yasukuni Shrine further inflamed the Chinese-Americans who now found themselves in a more powerful position. Iris Chang's celebrated book came out at the right time, with Chinese and Chinese-Americans in a position of strength. The emergence of the "comfort women" issue and the filing of class suits by former prisoners of the Japanese further gave prominence to World War II in Asia.

History can be used for political or pragmatic goals and as such can be considered a political football. The US used the history of Russia during the Cold War to show continuity in the Soviet Union's expansionist tendencies. The fighting of Americans and Filipinos side by side has been used to gain American good will and increased assistance. The Japanese nurtured Indonesian nationalism during their occupation of the archipelago but stopped short of granting them

independence; today, Japanese rightists claim that Japan fought to liberate Asia and cite Indonesia as an example. The Americans and British encouraged and supplied Vietnamese communists to fight the Japanese in 1944 and 1945; the Vietnamese looked to the US as a liberator, even quoting from Jefferson and Lincoln--but were disappointed when the Americans supported the return of the French.

Then again, there is the official line and popular sentiment, which do not always jibe. The Philippines, since the 1970s, has cultivated closer relations with Japan in order to obtain economic assistance and investments. In 1976, President Marcos tried to show that the wounds of the war had healed by inviting combatants from all countries that fought in the Philippines to visit the country in a "Reunion for Peace." Americans, Australians, and even British and Canadians came together with Japanese. But the tensions were still there, and the American former prisoners of war walked out when Philippine tourism officials tried to place them in the same hall with the Japanese. Some Filipinos welcomed the Japanese; others gave them a cold shoulder.

A more recent case underlines official memory and public sentiment. Lt. Onoda Hiro, the last straggler to surrender, was, a few years ago, invited to the island where he hid out for thirty years. The local government wanted him back to bring in Japanese investors, and prepared a sumptuous lunch and other programs to welcome him back. But the island's residents gathered outside the town hall with placards denouncing Onoda for his crimes against them.

### **III Other Participants in the war in Asia**

Discussions of World War II usually focus on the great powers. In this conference, we hear about Japan, the US and China. In Japan, some books do not even call the conflict World War II or the Pacific War but simply the Japan-US War. But there were other participants in that war, whose voices have not fully been heard. Of course, aside from Nanking, there were other incidents in China even pre-dating World War II, such as the use of biological warfare, bombing of civilians, and so on. But other countries were also occupied, or fought the war, and they too have their war memories.

It is good to hear that there is a move among Asian Americans to put up a museum to commemorate the Asian Holocaust. Beyond Nanking, there are incidents like the Bataan Death March and the Battle for Manila which Filipinos are keenly aware of, but few others outside the Philippines are aware of. (Incidentally, Iris Chang was researching a book on the Bataan Death March when she committed suicide). Even Americans, who fought in the defense of the Philippines, are disappointed that few Americans know what Bataan and Corregidor are, when during the war these were bywords.

Fewer still are aware of the experiences of the other countries of Asia. Indonesia suffered untold misery when thousands of men were forced to

work on the Thai-Burma railway; most of them never returned. Millions of Vietnamese died of starvation during the war's last year, mainly due to faulty economic planning by Japanese administrators. Chinese in Singapore were ruthlessly massacred by the Japanese conquerors in 1942. The Philippines suffered horrendously during the war and the Japanese occupation. Many Filipinos actually volunteered to join the Allied forces in invading Japan. When the atom bombs were dropped and the war ended, they were disappointed. But so severe was the Filipino experience that when news of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was received in Manila, many Filipinos thought the Americans should have dropped more atomic bombs. These other incidents deserve to be better known.

#### **IV Selective Memory**

The Japanese atrocities and the atomic bomb issues however have to be seen in context. Japan was not the only country to practice the water cure (now called waterboarding) or to use torture to obtain information. A visit to the war museums in Vietnam show similar techniques used by Americans during the Vietnam War. The US imperialism in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was also part of the road to Pearl Harbor. A recent book by James Bradley (*The Imperial Cruise*, 2009) even goes so far as to blame Theodore Roosevelt for actually starting the road to war.

World War II cannot be seen in total isolation and did not happen in a vacuum. It was part of other enfolding events. When US President George W Bush visited the Philippines a few years ago, he spoke of US-Philippine solidarity during World War II. Critics quickly reacted to the speech by pointing out how American soldiers fought against Filipino freedom fighters in 1899, or else cited American injustices to Filipino veterans. (Fortunately some of these are now being partially righted).

It was pointed out by the plenary speakers that Japan has a tendency to focus on Hiroshima and Nagasaki while the US emphasizes Pearl Harbor. In the Philippines the fall of Bataan and Corregidor is commemorated annually; Singapore observes the anniversary of its fall in February 1942 (and uses the event to call for preparedness). The city of Manila memorializes the Battle for Manila in 1945, where 100,000 noncombatant civilians were killed in a month long battle. Vietnam, on the other hand, remembers August 15, 1945--the day Japan accepted the Potsdam declaration--as its independence day. And so, events given importance by others are not necessarily considered important by others.

#### **V The Challenge to Historians**

Professor Ma ends her paper by saying that educating people about World War II in this global age is a challenge to historians. This is certainly a daunting

challenge, given all the other factors of our rapidly changing world--new technologies, information overload, different governmental priorities, shifting economic and power balances, and so on.

I would like to believe that some of our students now are more mature, being exposed to all the sources of information available, to be able to understand the different issues arising from the study and teaching of World War II. It should no longer be “us” versus “them”, but a larger framework with understanding rather than blaming being the main concern. In the Philippines, one cannot discuss Japanese atrocities and blame the Japanese alone; students will compare the war with the Fil-American War experience. Furthermore, many Filipinos have relatives working in Japan and have met Japanese. Many of the youth are into J-pop and anime; they know about the Death March but are quick to say that those were different times and the Japanese youth of today are not going to repeat those mistakes.

I also know that many Japanese do not know about what happened in the Philippines during the war and face culture shock when Filipino elders tell them about what happened. (Perhaps, as a result of trying to foment Japanese-Filipino friendship, some persons spread the erroneous story that it was the Koreans who perpetrated the atrocities, not the Japanese. This is untrue but is widely believed in the Philippines).

What is especially important is for persons of different nationalities to come together and share their histories--or memories--and finding out where their ideas jibe; where they do not then people have to find out why they don't. I have worked on several joint research projects with Japanese scholars and have interviewed Filipino, American and Japanese veterans. Joint research and publication should be the goal of scholars doing work on World War II, as we have gone beyond the narrow confines of one country's perspective. This has been done in the case of Singapore/Malaysia and Japan, the Philippines and Japan, and Indonesia and Japan. The problem, however, is that the output thus far has not reached the pre-college levels and in fact has not fully been disseminated to college teachers. There is much output, but the problem is that of dissemination.

Given for a like this, I feel that the continued mistrust and enmity can be solved through sustained sharing of memories. We might be a small number but hopefully what we have discussed here will reach many more.